

# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTE—SURPRISE

WERE I asked to state in one word the factor of chief importance in the technique of fiction, my unhesitating reply would be, "Surprise."

It is interest that carries a story, and surprise is the essential element of interest. All will agree that an effective piece of fiction almost necessarily must have a climax; yet, after all, what is a climax but a surprise? The tale must deal with interesting characters; but, as pointed out in a previous article (*Creative Characterization*), it is the revelation of surprising traits that makes a character interesting. Even the effectiveness of an author's style is dependent upon surprise. This is especially true in humorous writing, but, if we analyze closely, it will also be found to be the case in other types.

It is sometimes asserted that suspense is the essential of interest in fiction—indeed, this has been emphasized in Student-Writer discussions. The claim is easily sustained; for, after all, suspense is but the complement of surprise. We can hardly conceive of one without assuming the other, any more than we can think of an outside without assuming an inside, of a shadow without assuming a light, or a result without assuming a cause.

The knack of skillful story-telling consists in devising a series of surprises at just the right intervals, and of just the right nature, to prevent the reader's interest from lagging.

A study of published fiction will make this clearer than any amount of abstract statement. Sometimes the student will find that the interest is sustained by a series of small surprises, following close upon one another, which keep the reader alert as does the rapid exploding of a bunch of firecrackers. Sometimes the story will contain few surprises, separated by extended intervals, but each will be of considerable power. Not infrequently, the story depends upon one big, smashing surprise.

Broadly speaking, a story should have either frequency or volume of surprise. And while not every surprise may be of 150-centi-

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meter power, it is advisable for the story to contain at least one big "bang." In a recent article, "two slams and a bang" were suggested as the ideal for a short-story, and though the subject was then being considered from another standpoint, much the same idea was implied.

As the best means of showing the importance of surprise in fiction and illustrating some among the ways in which it may be employed and the guises in which it appears, let us run through a number of published stories found in current magazines.

It would be well for students, if possible, to supplement the reading of this article by procuring the magazines and reading the stories to which reference is made.

First, as a very clear example of fiction worked out by devising a succession of unexpected elements or surprises, take "Sans Camouflage," by Lawton Mackall, in the Century magazine for September, 1918.

Probably there are few events that exceed in surprise possibilities the unexpected appearance in polite society of a more or less unclad person. The moving-picture comedy director, whenever he is at a loss for something to startle his audience into shrieks of laughter, has a sure-fire device in causing the comedian, by some mischance, to lose his trousers at a public reception or on a like occasion. Though it is a vulgar trick, few can resist laughing at the consternation of the denuded one.

In "Sans Camouflage," the device cannot be termed trite, because it keeps the average reader entertained. No matter how many times the same basic surprise may have been employed before in story, drama, photoplay and comic supplement, so long as there is a surprise, the incidents are not hackneyed.

To make the incidents as effective as possible, the author of the story pictures his hero, Professor Bumsen, as a man of "stately dignity" who "would sooner have perished from suffocation than appear brazenly before a lady without his coat," even though he is suffering intensely from the heat and possesses "the physique of a sedentary bullfrog."

The first important surprise is that which the reader shares with Professor Bumsen when, after divesting himself of his clothing in the guest-room to which he has been shown and stepping out on the roof to cool himself in a shower under the protection of night, he discovers that wet shingles are slippery.

A moment afterward he finds himself on the ground, sans clothing, with no way conceivable by which a man of his avoirdupois and limited athletic ability can obtain his wearing apparel—surely a most unexpected situation for a man of the professor's type to find himself in.

The rest of the story is a succession of such unexpected develop-

ments as the author can devise from this situation. Bumsen knocks at the door to attract his host's attention, but it is Mrs. Host who answers the knock, naturally sending him scurrying to the bushes. He tries again and the oldest daughter responds.

Then comes the surprise of the approaching serenaders—college boys bent on calling him out to make a speech. The effectiveness of this surprise, of course, is all owing to the predicament of the professor.

He seeks the protection of young evergreens, but another unexpected development makes this effort at concealment vain—it is the presence of a dog among the serenaders—a dog whose sense of smell and excited barks soon draw attention to the clump in which the professor is hiding.

He seeks refuge in the henhouse and—climax of surprises—is taken for a chicken-thief—staid Professor Bumsen—from which predicament he is saved only by the startling disclosure of his true identity.

The story thus is summarized in full when its mileposts of surprise are set down. It has interest, because the reader is constantly reacting to the fresh surprises, strung along in close succession, and because of the complementary suspense, which causes us to wonder what is to happen next—how the professor is going to escape from his predicament.

Interest also is sustained by verbal surprises—unexpected similes and cleverly turned phrases. In the opening sentence, for example, we have the phrase, "Professor Bumsen glowed with eloquence and perspiration."

Classing incongruous things or ideas together is a novelty—a surprise—whenever it occurs. It causes the reader to reflect instinctively, "Well, now, I never thought there was anything in common between eloquence and perspiration—but of course, they both cause a speaker to glow, in certain senses of the word."

Here is another verbal surprise—a refreshingly unusual combination of words: "Delectable, beatific moment! The cool drops capered ravishingly down his back."

Verbal surprise of this type is suitable, of course, chiefly for humorous writing. The surprise in this tale, both in its incidents and its style, depends upon "descending incongruity"—nearly always the basis of humor. "Eloquence and perspiration"; Professor Bumsen with his stately dignity, to whom it is impossible to appear before a lady even without his coat, scrambling around in the underbrush sans clothing and being taken for a chicken-thief! Even the grotesque combination of "Professor" and "Bumsen" excites one's risibilities. Why—it amounts nearly to a recipe for writing humor. Bring incongruous elements together, surprise the reader with their

combination—and the result, if the trick is skillfully accomplished, cannot fail to give entertainment and provoke laughter.

Of altogether antipodal type to this tale is "Conrad Norman," by Harvey O'Higgins, in the same issue of the Century. "Conrad Norman" is a yarn of the type to which aspiring authors refer when they want to refute the statement that a story, in order to be interesting and salable, must have an original plot.

It has scarcely more than the semblance of a plot, but is a simple narrative involving the exposition of character. The author, it would almost seem, set for himself the task of arousing interest in a commonplace, hackneyed situation—a village love affair in which the girl's parents play the conventional part of opposing the match and forcing her to marry into a higher social rank.

Out of this situation grows the most ordinary train of incidents. The girl yields to her parents' desires and marries into the English aristocracy, while the hero becomes a motion-picture star, after which the heroine's titled husband conveniently dies and the childhood sweethearts are united.

Submitted in its crude outline form to an editor, this plot undoubtedly would suggest an unpromising amateur, without originality, insight, or imagination.

Yet Mr. O'Higgins makes the story vitally interesting. As he handles it, we seem to have been favored with an opportunity of viewing real life through glasses of rare discernment and from an unusually intimate standpoint. Skillful character-drawing sheds a glamour of interest over what, with ordinary handling, would be a flat, colorless piece of village history.

Yet, if we search for the secret of the effective character-drawing, we find that it depends almost entirely upon surprise.

As the situation unfolds, despite what seems superficially to be a hackneyed situation, we discover that everything related is somewhat different from the ordinary. For example, it is true that the parents oppose the heroine's marriage to the common baker's boy—a most conventional thing for parents to do—but their opposition is purely tacit. They scarcely realize that the baker's boy exists. Their opposition is the stronger because it is unconscious, unspoken—it is taken for granted in their attitude and habits of thought.

A genuine surprise is present in this feature, even though it is subtle and must be described as of the slowly dawning variety.

Again there is the surprise of our realization that the girl, a finished product of her parents' aristocratic ideals, has given her heart to the neighbor boy. It is this surprise that the author, telling the story in the first person as a friend of both factions, impresses upon the reader in the introductory passages. To make it as effective as possible, he emphasizes the exclusiveness of the girl's family

and the plebeian nature of the boy's antecedents. For further emphasis on the surprise of the situation, he declares, "\* \* \* \* the first time I saw Con even speak to her I thought I had turned his head."

In this case—that of a serious character-study—as in the case of the burlesque humorous story—we find that surprise is attained by bringing incongruous elements together. In the present story the incongruous elements are purely human.

Close upon the heels of the surprise felt when Con has the temerity to ask the frigidly exclusive Flora for a dance comes an even greater surprise—the look of warning—of secret understanding—which she darts at him. Simple foolhardiness might account for his attempt to scale the cliff that separates them socially, but her apparent unbending, in defiance of her parents and their precepts, is the acme of unexpectedness, as pictured by the author.

Following this are several more or less secondary surprises—the discovery that Flora wants a private interview with the narrator; his verification of her interest in Con; her "Don't let him speak to me again," followed by the faltered, "Be—be-kind to him"; his finding of Con in the throes of grief, unexpected in one so young; the revelation that the clandestine affair is of many years' standing, and still further surprises—dependent, for the most part, upon unforeseen character-reactions in the farewell scene between the lovers.

The author has made it clear that Con is a born actor, thus there is surprise in his utter failure on the stage, and still further surprise when he later makes good as a screen star.

> The ending of the tale is tame and artificial. To readers surfeited with the conventional happy ending, there can be little surprise in the development that Flora's husband is conveniently killed in battle, leaving her free to marry the screen star. And this, while a negative instance, is further proof that the interest of fiction is dependent upon the amount of surprise involved—for the conclusion of this story certainly is not interesting compared with the rest, and it is not surprising.

In "The Unexpected Bridegroom," by Robert McBlair, in the September 7th Popular Magazine, we find another humorous story based upon surprise. In fact, the editor calls attention to the appeal of the story by announcing under the heading, "Two distinguished colored gentlemen decide on a matrimonial venture that has all the elements of surprise, if not stupefaction."

The title seeks further to allure the reader by promising an unexpected development. The fact that it also gives a strong hint as to what that unexpected development will consist of might seem against it, for a surprise that is "given away" beforehand certainly cannot be much of a surprise. But it is a peculiar fact, if paradox-

ical, that we sometimes like to be startled by something that we know is going to happen.

It is this peculiar trait in human nature that causes the little tot, whom you have already convulsed over and over by exclaiming "Boo!" to beg, "Scare me again—please scare me again!"

It is the same trait that causes us to take repeated trips over the steeplechase or roller-coaster—to experience again the sensation of being startled by the same plunges and dips.

So surprise, while usually dependent upon taking the victim un-awares, under some conditions may intensify interest through being anticipated.

In Mr. McBlair's story the suspense is quickened by the reader's suspicion that the real bridegroom is going to come upon the scene unexpectedly. We realize that when he does appear there is bound to be an explosion. We are fascinated by the expectation, just as we would be by the burning of a cannon-cracker fuse, which brings the spark nearer at every moment to the imprisoned gunpowder.

The story, from a plot standpoint, depends for its effectiveness upon one smashing surprise. Leading up to this, Lawyer Little and Fish Kelly, colored citizens, conspire to obtain the "death insurance" money that is coming to Mrs. Anna Henry, bride of but a few days. Their belief that she is entitled to the insurance money is based upon the disappearance of John Henry, the groom, and the discovery of an unrecognizable corpse which has been washed up out of the river. The scheme for putting the \$600 into their pockets is based upon the simple expedient of marrying her to Fish Kelly.

John Henry, needless to say, appears upon the scene just as his successor is trying to claim the insurance money from the treasurer of the African Living and Dead Society.

Interest is maintained, to a large extent, by the anticipation of this surprise. It is augmented by a constant succession of minor incongruities and unexpected twists of incident, expression, and character.

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In the first sentence we have, "The rather portly colored gentleman known interchangeably as Lawyer or Reverend Little." Incongruity—always, remember, a basis for surprise—makes this combination of occupations in one person effective.

Among quaint conceits of the characters and amusing dialect features is the surprising idea of Fish Kelly that, since the insurance policy provides a scale of benefits covering loss of both eyes, one ear, one hand, permanent disability, and other accidents, the dead man, having sustained all these disasters, is entitled to the combined sums, in addition to his death claim.

Again, there is his unanswerable argument to the possibility that John Henry may still be alive: "If he so et up can't nobody tell he is John Henry, den can't nobody say he *ain't* John Henry, can dey?"

Still again, when Fish Kelly begins to lose his nerve at thought of marrying Mrs. John Henry, his unexpected change of heart takes us sufficiently by surprise to draw a chuckle: "I don't want no money," he answered. "I got some money. Don't need no money in summertime, nohow."

Lawyer Little's response to this is, "Come on out of here. You an' me is gwine up street on some business." The business is sufficiently mysterious to give the reader a surprise when the walk up street resolves itself into the command: "Go on over dar an' ax 'at 'ooman to marry you."

Other surprises develop during the brief courtship, not the least of which is Mrs. John Henry's acceptance of the marriage offer, regardless of the fact that her husband of a week is still in existence, so far as she knows.

In the scene following the marriage ceremony the author makes the most of opportunities for surprise. To Mrs. Fish Kelly—formerly Mrs. Henry—the news of her first husband's demise is not broken until the knot has been safely tied. Her claim for the insurance benefit meets with unexpected opposition from the African Living and Dead Society, when it appears from the record that the \$600 is payable to Mrs. John Henry—not to Mrs. Fish Kelly.

"You done cheated me outa my money!" screams the bride, producing a peeling knife from her bosom with murderous intent, just before the unexpected bridegroom, Big John Henry himself, crashes open the door and, by the reckless discharge of his revolver, sends the wedding party scurrying to cover.

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There is no doubt that this surprise, anticipated by most readers, was the more effective for that reason. The question, then, naturally arises: When is it advisable to "put the reader wise" in advance by artful suggestions; and when, on the other hand, is it more effective to let the surprise happening come with the full force of unexpectedness?

This last tale at least furnishes a clue to the answer. When the story is made up of a succession of equally important surprises, it is a gain if they come upon the reader unexpectedly. The frequent succession of startling developments keeps the interest alive and makes the reader alert.

When the story depends upon one big surprise coming at the climax, it may be advisable to hint in advance that it is imminent. Otherwise, the reader possibly will not find enough thrills in the early part to sustain his interest. The expectation of an explosion or startling development makes for suspense and heightens our interest in the details which seem to be leading up to it.

The first story discussed, "Sans Camouflage," was an illustration of the first half of this principle; this last story is an illustration of the second half.

A very effective construction indeed is that in which an anticipated "bang" is followed by something totally unexpected. Such construction gives a story both the suspense of anticipation and the breath-taking qualities of total unexpectedness.

*(To be continued in the October number.)*

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